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Sebastian Kanally
University of Windsor

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The Truth of Carousing Peasants Becomes Disclosed

Sebastian Kanally
University of Windsor

In the time allotted to me, I would like to present to you my reading of Martin Heidegger's theory of art. It is quite ironic that this segment of the conference is entitled the "aesthetics panel" because Heidegger's entire theory of art is an explicit rejection of the *aestheticization* of art. In a nut shell, this means that Heidegger rejects this method by claiming it hides art's true historical significance. He explicitly rejects that the subject/object divide exists in ordinary human experience or true art. The aestheticization of art is premised on this separation and therefore looks for art in the wrong place. It looks at a derivative rather than a primordial level of human interaction with the world (Stanford encyclopedia 2.6).

Heidegger thinks that it is necessary to get behind this subject/object dichotomy, which itself is only derivative of a deeper more primordial experience all humans have, and that is of everyday worldly engagement. When we use a hammer, a pen, a car or a book for example, the wealth of human engagement occurs at a place for Heidegger where subject and object is gone. We are always thrown into the world, and our being in the world is always a situation of practical engagement. Heidegger in *Being and Time*, states that the *world* is something that Dasein is always already familiar with and is the horizon that everyday existence confidently moves (Being and Time 1996, 16: 71). Dasein is never separate from this world like the subject/object divide portrays.

For Heidegger, the subject/object divide only confronts us after something stops us in our tracks and makes us feel isolated from the world of being. For example, when your pen runs out of ink and you don't have another one, you feel powerless, isolated and unengaged as a subject in a world, that is contrary to ordinary experience.

This is worth noting, in understanding Heidegger's theory of art because he thinks that this primordial level of human engagement, that is before a subject/object distinction, is where "true art" accomplishes its ontologically-revolutionary work. Thus, the question is what is true art for Heidegger?

Heidegger's interest in producing a theory of art, lies on the question, what is it that makes something a work of art; this will inevitably involve not only what the artist puts on display, but also what art does to the observers. In this talk I will lay out what I think to be the three crucial aspects of Heidegger's theory of art, while applying his theory to Adriaen van Ostade's 1634 painting "Carousing Peasants in a Rustic Interior." I argue that this work of art is insightful in facilitating a deep understanding of Heidegger's theory by exemplifying all three aspects. And furthermore, Heidegger's theory is a liberating conception of art that attempts to ascertain a more fundamental human engagement with art and truth. It leaves more narrow and aesthetic conceptions of art behind, and ought to be taken seriously in today's world.

The painting I have chosen, "Carousing Peasants In a Rustic Interior," is by Adrien van Ostade, who was a Dutch realist painter; iconic to what is called the Dutch golden age of painting. He was born in Harlem in 1610, and was influenced by the major Dutch artisans of his day such as Frans Hals and Adriaen Brouwer. Ostade was at a transitional time in the history of art that allowed him to develop his own style of painting. From the Encyclopedia of Old Master Painters entry about Ostade: "Everything is for character and truthfulness and nothing for show. His genre-painting charmingly combines ready sympathy of observation with reflection" (Collins and Muireadhaigh 2016). Ostade embodies this style of genre-painting in his work by recreating scenes of everyday life. Specifically, Ostade was interested in and painted many scenes depicting the life of peasants. One of his famous works: "Carousing Peasants in a Rustic Interior", is a painting that presents a few peasants congregating in a small, humble, partly lit dwelling at the end of the day.

Heidegger's most complete presentation of his theory of art is contained in, *The Origin of The Work of Art*. Here he says: "Our aim is to arrive at the immediate and full actuality of the work of art, for only in this way shall we discover actual art also within it, (Heidegger 1977, 146). In pursuit of this identifiable element, Heidegger comes to discover something essential about the work of art. "Art is then a becoming and happening of truth" (Heidegger 1977, 196). I will now discuss how Heidegger comes to this essential characterization of "true art".

Heidegger's theory of the work of art contains three major components, each of which I will argue is manifest in Ostade's painting, (Krell 1977, 142). The three major components of Heidegger's theory of the work of art are: firstly, the work of art reveals a tension between "earth" and "world" by instigating what he calls "strife." Secondly, the work of art reveals its truth as unconcealment or (*alētheia*), and thirdly, art is *poesis*; art, through language, produces beings that organically unfold out of themselves as unconcealment.

Strife

The first essential component to Heidegger's theory of the work of art is that art must reveal a tension between what he calls *world* and *earth*. This tension is what Heidegger calls *strife*. The *earth* is the material foundation of the work of art, (this could be) the actual physical constitution of the work and/or the material represented through the work's content. The "earth" does not portray or mean anything in its simple way of being. This earth is the foundation of the art piece that sets forth a world of intelligibility into the open. The artwork's resistance to the simplicity of earth creates the unique experience of the work of art. From these simple and unintelligible earthly elements, the *world* juts forth and transcends the former.

This idea of world is crucial to understanding Heidegger's theory of art and his whole philosophy. Beings do not merely exist in isolation; there is an entire relational totality in which beings exist as beings. But this world is not reducible to earthly matter, it exists in such a way as to

be comprehended by Dasein. The Standard Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes Heidegger's notion of world as: "A large-scale holistic network of interconnected relational significance. Such networks constitute worlds," (Wheeler 2016, 2.2.3). A world for Heidegger is the totality of beings and ways of being towards things. These non-corporeal connections exist in the space of intelligibility and this constitutes a world.

In the work of art that I have chosen Ostade captures one isolated moment in these peasants' mundane, rough lifestyles to bring forth a world of meaning that emerges out of the earthly element. This earthly element exists through the haphazardly placed patchwork on the dark and cold mud walls in addition to the dirty clothes each peasant is wearing. This earth, the material conditions within the painting, captures a home, a meaningful life of human relations behind this probably insignificant moment in the peasants' lives. The work, reveals a world of meaning that goes beyond the immanent connection of these peasants as part of the material foundations within the work. This world of meaning represents the human relationships and individuals themselves, that are only momentarily captured in the artwork.

Ostade produces this constant strife between earth and world as well through the actual material constituting the work of art. The work by Ostade is an oil painting on an oak panel. These two materials disclose the complexity of human interactions that exist in the simple and uneventful lives of mere peasants of the 17th century. This piece of art, that has been preserved since 1634, is just a piece of oak with oil paint on it; these relatively insignificant and arbitrary materials produce a beautiful piece of art that means something more than that. It recreates the lives and unconceals the truth of peasant life. This vision, into the world of the peasants constitutes a holistic network of interconnected relational significance. This can only happen by what Heidegger calls, "setting up a world and setting forth the earth...[as] an instigating of this strife" (Heidegger 1977, 188).

Truth as Unconcealment

Continuing to the second component of Heidegger's theory, the work of art has a unique function as it brings beings out of their concealment and allows them to self-manifest. The figures in the painting are revealed and continue to unconceal themselves. This is initiated from the opening of a world that was explained in section 1. What the artwork therefore does primarily is bring about truth, because the essence of the true, as Heidegger describes in the *Origin of The Work of Art* is ascertained by recollecting the Greek word *alētheia*, defined as the unconcealment of beings (Heidegger 1977, 176). The beings of the painting are brought out of their concealment, or their simplistic appearance and are unconcealed in truth. Or in Heidegger's words: "They are revealed to the observers as a clearing of what was previously concealed" (Heidegger 1977, 178). For beings to unconceal themselves there must be a space opened for them. Heidegger calls this a clearing (Heidegger 1977, 178). This is of paramount importance for Heidegger's theory, truth has meaning, and for truth to be understood it must reveal itself through a totality of meaning that transcends the concealedness of earth.

David Farrell Krell, who wrote the introduction to this work in the *Basic Writings* says: "Heidegger therefore calls art the becoming of truth, the setting to work of the truth of beings"(Krell 1977, 142). Truth for Heidegger is more than simple correspondence through language; truth tries to unconceal how the being is in-itself. From Heidegger's paper "On the Essence of Truth" he says, "The essence of truth is freedom" (Heidegger 1977, 128). Thus, truth does not require formal language, it merely necessitates a pointing to what the being is in-itself. The work of art transcends the mere earthly elements to create this very space for the work to unfold itself and reveal things about this painting that were previously hidden from view.

Staring at Ostade's painting you can feel the rough toilsome days under the hot sun amid summer. Conversely, we understand there is no shortage of cold days when winter is near and harvesting season is ending. All this you can experience by looking at a still capturing of a single

night in the peasant house. The fire must be constantly attended to, to ensure a habitable environment. The anticipation everyone holds through the entire working day, waiting for that final moment when they can call it a day, when they can retreat to the comfort of the shack where their spirits will be kept alive by the warmth of human relationships. The peasants continuously drink to escape the mundane work-nature of their life, trying to enjoy *their* only time with friends and co-workers. The scene of peasants drinking and having a good time captures this entire world, the world of a hard-working peasant in the Dutch golden age. It is evident that the peasants' lives are not filled with only these good times; the painting is successful in revealing the truth of these beings and the lives they live. This occurs because the work of art opens itself up from the tough, hard, cold earthly elements and is resisted by a world of high spirits and human beings that transcend the simplicity of the former.

Importantly, in qualification of the previous point, this work of art does not completely unconceal the world presented in the work. Heidegger notes in his work that there is a dialectic between clearing and concealing in the work of art (Heidegger 1977, 180). There is still much we do not know about these peasants'; their lives could never be fully disclosed in a static picture. The artist even represents this Heideggarian idea in the painting itself. With the lighting in the shack being limited to only the fire in the bottom left corner, it is not a source of light that pervades every corner of the shack, but reveals mainly the two men in the middle of the room. The long friendship these two have possibly had is brought into light, it appears that they are comfortable joking around with each other. But, the other figures in the painting remain to some extent concealed; specifically, the two figures in the bottom left attending to the fire. They are not completely illuminated and unconcealed by the light of the fire. They appear but then recede back into the darkness and concealment of their being. This distinction between clearing and concealing is important because it distinguishes truth from being static to a dynamic and evasive entity.

Poesis

One of Heidegger's last remarks towards the end of his work is his realization that art has this influence of unconcealment, primarily through language (Heidegger 1977, 198). This is not to constrain the spectrum of art to merely a piece of literature that articulates the truth through well-spoken language. But, conversely, what Heidegger is saying here is that the truth of art is conveyed through different forms of language. Language is not limited to propositions that require subject, object and copula. Propositions are one formal indication or a *pointing* that art can do informally. Language is the communication of truths through all sorts of mediums; but language through art acts as an opening up of a world of meaning behind the mere *prima facie* analysis of the observable elements of the work of art. This interpretative component is what has been hinted at all along. A world of meaning can only be comprehended by intelligent beings, but we cannot merely intuit the truth, it must be revealed or conveyed to us in a certain form and one communication of that is the unique language of art.

This communication aspect of Heidegger's theory appeals to the preservation of the work through what Heidegger calls the "resoluteness of the preservers" (Heidegger 1977, 192). Resoluteness in Heidegger's conception is the authentic way of individuals to will and think in such a way that opens them up to the unconcealment of being in the work of art (Heidegger 1977, 192). Through this authentic act of Dasein, the observers preserve the world because there is an openness to the language but also an engagement to preserve and recreate the work of art.

The artwork is thus defined by its *poesis* i.e. the act of self-making. The rift is the capturing of this specific moment in the painting. But, the world that is opened to us is something that extends beyond that moment and begins unfolding out of itself and revealing the truth of its world. This is

achieved through the language in the work of art. The truth of the world of carousing peasants is not stuck inside one isolated moment in the peasant's lives, but exists as a *constant unfolding* of their lives i.e. there is a necessary element of temporality to the truth.

The peasants' routinely get up every day and go into the fields, working hard, coming home, and doing the same thing every day. Ostade's work of art reveals this temporal cycle to us as observers of the world disclosed. The truth of the beings in this work can be understood as the constant unfolding of its own truth through the activities of the peasants, which is unconcealed out of itself through the artwork. The artwork communicates this primarily through a non-propositional language that appeals to the pathos of the observer, in the sense that you can feel the nature of these peasants' lives. Therefore, this *poesis* refers to the unfolding of the everyday routine of the peasants' lives. This moment, which is forever stuck in time, beautifully captured by Ostade, accurately depicts the strife in these peasant's lives. As well, the strife of the work of art itself reveals an organic unfolding of the truth of these beings. This can only happen through us, the audience, who act as preservers of the artwork.

So we come to the question of why does this theory matter? This painting describes a seemingly insignificant moment in these peasants' lives; but, in the opening of a world of meaning, these peasants' mundane lives are revealed to all observers and this can only be re-created in the preservers of the work. Meaning does not continue separate from human engagement. Heidegger notes that: "Preserving the work does not reduce people to their private experiences, but brings them into affiliation with the truth happening in the work" (Heidegger 1977, 193). Thus, the observer must see the world, but in doing so, the observer is taken into a world that escapes the present.

This human engagement of the preservers is revealed through this work of art and why it is worth examining. Ostade is known for revealing a patronizing element to his work. "He is a

gentleman with a hobby for the observation of peasant life. His attitude is kindly and understanding, just a little condescending," (Collins and Muireadhaigh 2016). Some people will look at this painting as if it is intended to be a caricature making fun of peasants, but the truth of this painting shines through the narrower intentions of the artist. The truth of this painting is the peasants' lives, but also the revelation of human solidarity through every class and division in human life. Human relationships and solidarity are essential to keeping the spirits high of every socio-economic class i.e. bourgeois, proletariat, peasants, etc., this is a truth recognized through many ages. Whether Ostade was observing with condescension of peasant life or merely trying to depict it in a neutral manner, the human experience of joyfulness, enjoyment and solidarity through human relationships is revealed in this work. This truth is perpetually being lost in today's world of mass consumption and materiality, the oversight of what truly matters and is universal to human existence: what gives life meaning is the relationships we cultivate. This understanding of human life is captured by Heidegger's view of the work of art and thus brings with it a compelling understanding of a quintessentially human cultural product.

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